

The Zimbabwe Exiles Forum: Campaigning for Freedom in the Homeland



Gabriel Shumba

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By Patrick Kavanagh

Zimbabwe drew its post-colonial name from Great Zimbabwe, a city of stone buildings that flourished in southern Africa between the 11th and 15th centuries. Although Great Zimbabwe is the country's national monument, there is no denying that these stirring structures today comprise little but a ruin. Some fear that a similar fate awaits modern Zimbabwe itself, because in recent years this once robust nation has been in steep decline.

No home, no work, no justice

Not long ago Zimbabwe was the "breadbasket of Africa." Today its collapsing economy is wracked by hyperinflation and periodic shortages of foreign exchange, fuel, food, and other basic commodities. Direct foreign investment has evaporated. According to the World Health Organization, the life expectancy of women – 33 years – is among the lowest in the world. The country suffers one of the globe's highest rates of HIV/AIDS infection. Unemployment, hunger, and poverty are endemic.

Some observers pin the blame for the economic emergency on broad patterns of corruption. According to this analysis, the country's military, political, and bureaucratic elites have hijacked the instruments of government to serve their own narrow interests. Other observers, meanwhile, point specifically to the harsh political policies of Zimbabwe's president, Robert Mugabe.

According to Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other monitors, repression and torture are systematically employed against critics of the governing party, ZANU-PF, and especially against supporters of the opposition, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). In 2005, in a stunningly callous act called "Operation Drive Out Filth," the government bulldozed the homes of hundreds of thousands of urban poor – most of them likely MDC followers. Amnesty's 2006 report sums up their continuing plight: "no home, no work, no justice."

Zimbabwe's government has consistently denied such allegations of human rights abuses, and has blamed the economic crisis on extended drought and on the machinations of "Western imperialists." Independent observers from both inside and outside the country generally give little credence to this view, which they dismiss as fabrication and propaganda.

Exiles demand reform

Despite facing such a hostile government, courageous people continue to struggle for the dignity and rights of Zimbabweans. In Pretoria, South Africa, in 2003, a group of displaced lawyers formed the Zimbabwe Exiles Forum (ZEF) to work for political change in their homeland.

Recently, Rights & Democracy sponsored ZEF representatives on a tour of Canadian cities. ZEF's executive director, Gabriel Shumba, and Marilyn Tudor, a lawyer and human rights advocate, visited IDRC's offices in Ottawa to explain their work.

Research for justice

ZEF's mission is "to combat impunity and achieve justice and dignity for victims of human rights violations occurring in Zimbabwe, with particular emphasis on the exiled victims." The organization believes in practical action, and its core activity is legal research and the documentation of abuses.

ZEF activists interview as many as possible of the thousands of Zimbabwean refugees who each day flee to South Africa, Botswana, and other countries. Rights & Democracy has helped train these interviewers, with a particular focus on gender sensitivity. ZEF gathers the testimony into dossiers for use in advocacy and lobbying, and in litigation aimed at the prosecution of offenders.

Obviously, this litigation can happen only outside Zimbabwe. Says Shumba: "We must look abroad because the justice system in Zimbabwe is compromised by intimidation." Some of ZEF's cases have already been brought before the African Commission on Human and People's Rights or have been referred to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture.

Appeal for bold measures

One aspect of ZEF's approach is to lobby countries, such as Canada, where domestic legislation allows the prosecution of serious crimes regardless where the offences were committed. "We're here to persuade the Canadian government to speak up about human rights abuses in Zimbabwe," says Shumba, "to use its influence with the Security Council, with frontline countries by way of the Commonwealth, with the International Criminal Court – even with China which is a big trading partner of both Canada and Zimbabwe. And we want Canada to invoke its domestic laws on crimes against humanity to bring Zimbabwean perpetrators to justice."

Gabriel Shumba has personal reasons to feel optimistic about the latter approach. He himself was brutally tortured by state agents in 2003, and fled Zimbabwe when he began to fear for the safety of his young family. In 2004, the British-based activist Peter Tatchell highlighted Shumba's case when he demanded that British courts seek the arrest and extradition of Robert Mugabe on charges of torture. That bold campaign dramatically raised public awareness worldwide about the human rights emergency in Zimbabwe.

Crocodiles and caves

In addition to its research and advocacy, ZEF offers practical assistance to the huge numbers of Zimbabwean refugees, for example by providing advice on applying for asylum in host countries. Shumba is scathing about these countries' treatment of his exiled compatriots: "In South Africa the situation of refugees is dismal. The government provides no humanitarian support. Reportedly, people have been eaten by crocodiles while trying to swim into South Africa. In Botswana meanwhile, some Zimbabwean refugees are said to be living in caves."

Such desperate willingness to take risks and endure misery is driven not just by political repression but also by appalling social conditions in Zimbabwe. Marilyn Tudor provides a litany of grim details: hundreds of thousands of displaced and homeless, including women and children, many living in crowded conditions without sanitation or clean drinking water, and lacking schools, clinics, and hospitals; frightful maternal and infant mortality rates; horrific levels of HIV/AIDS while corrupt officials withhold lifesaving drugs; and so on.

Means of survival

Women have been the particular victims of a government crackdown on money launderers, a campaign that has essentially criminalized the burgeoning informal economy. “Operation Sunrise” gives ZANU-PF youth enforcers the power to rob people of their foreign currency. They have targeted vegetable sellers and other street vendors who routinely cross the border with South Africa. These women are subjected to roadblocks and degrading strip searches, and are beaten and held in filthy prisons – sometimes along with their children.

Furthermore, says Tudor: “The government uses food as a weapon. If you have no ZANU-PF card you can’t get food. The government doesn’t send food to MDC areas. To get food, or to obtain farm inputs such as fertilizer, some people buy memberships in ZANU-PF even though they are not supporters. It is simply a means of survival.”

Working for transition

Toward the end of their tour of Canada, ZEF’s representatives were disappointed to learn that this country’s justice minister, Vic Toews, had denied their request that Canada bring charges against Robert Mugabe. His explanation: as a head of state, Mugabe enjoys immunity from such prosecution. Some Canadian legal experts disagree with Minister Toews.

Meanwhile, what is ZEF’s outlook for Zimbabwe?

“The presidential election is scheduled for 2008,” says Shumba, “but everyone fears Mugabe will amend the constitution. He wants to postpone that ballot so that it can coincide with the parliamentary elections in 2010. That might allow him to stay on for two more years.”

As for the opposition, meanwhile, Shumba points out that “right now the MDC is beset by divisions. But if elections were really free and fair, that party would do well. It is important to remember that many potential supporters have been driven out of the country and disenfranchised – people like myself.”

Complicating the prospects for peaceful change is the fact that Mugabe has appointed not one but two vice-presidents, which raises the spectre of political chaos in the event of a sudden handover of power. “Such a cauldron of potential explosion!” says Shumba with a wry laugh. Should Zimbabwe collapse politically, another scenario is that “the Southern African Development Community could send a regional force to help the transitional government organize fresh elections.”

Sooner or later, of course, a transition will come, but Gabriel Shumba insists that Zimbabweans should not be content simply to sit back and wait, “We must work now to restore democracy in our homeland.”

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